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Berry honored for rural deeds

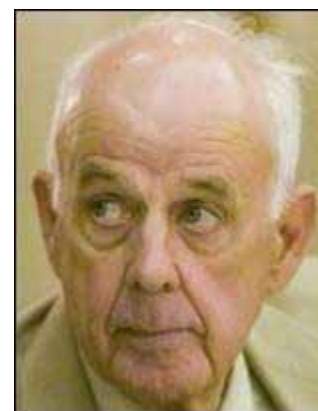
Global group presents award

By **Melissa Gagliardi**
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 The Courier-Journal

Renowned farmer, writer and conservationist Wendell Berry has another award to add to his resume, but this time the honor was not for a poem or a book, but for his contributions to rural life.

With a button stating "Stop Mountaintop Removal" pinned to his suit, Berry accepted a Distinguished Service to Rural Life award from the international Rural Sociological Society. The organization held its 69th annual meeting over the weekend in Louisville.

Berry said he was surprised to be honored by the group, given that much of his writing over the years has generated controversy. His books and essays are known for a theme that blames the demise of rural communities on



The award was "kind of a surprise," Wendell Berry said yesterday.

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agribusiness and the industrial economy.

"You don't expect certain things. The things I've written have been controversial, and to have a whole group honor you for them is kind of a surprise," he said, adding with a laugh, "and kind of a relief."

If anyone in the crowd disagreed with him yesterday, no one

indicated that. Instead, he was met with a steady line of students and teachers clutching his books, all of which he happily signed. One student snapped his picture with her cell phone.

About 400 people from around the world attended the three-day conference, which ended yesterday with the award ceremony.

JoAnn Jaffe, award chairwoman and a sociologist from the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, said Berry was an easy choice for the award, with a large number of society members nominating him.


"He's such an eloquent, thoughtful spokesperson, deeply committed to his place," she said. Jaffe first met Berry on his farm 35 years ago while on a high school trip, and she said he displays the same warmth and openness today that he did then.

In accepting the award, he spoke of the changes necessary at land-grant universities if there is to be a healthy movement in sustainable agriculture.

He recalled his freshman year at the University of Kentucky in 1952, when he assumed that the food he ate in the student cafeteria had been grown on the university's land by faculty and students of the College of Agriculture -- and his disappointment when its taste told him otherwise.


He also said that it was only after leaving Kentucky and returning that he saw the threats to and decline of its rural ways.

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Beth Barham, a sociologist at the University of Missouri-Columbia, found herself "continually choked up" during the award ceremony, which also honored a number of other sociologists. She first met Berry on his farm in 1995 while working on her dissertation and said it was the best research experience she ever had.

"He's been quite influential and continues to be for the future of rural sociology," she said. "I think he's a natural treasure. ... This is a really big honor for our society."

These days, globalization of agribusiness is foremost on Berry's mind. He said that the end of cheap energy will change how food is distributed, and communities will be required to act locally.

Seeing the crowd of academics gathered for the weekend program was "hope-giving," he said. To him, it doesn't matter whether people agree with his views as long as the issues are being discussed:

"Conversation does not require agreement. It goes better, in fact, and is more instructive, if there are divergences. I intend to stick to my point of view, but I say, long live the conversation."

Reporter Melissa Gagliardi can be reached at (502) 582-4117.

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